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ABSTRACT

This public lecture, delivered in Nyack, New York in October 2002, concerns parents' role in middle school education reform. The lecture identifies perceived and actual problems in middle school education related to student achievement and teacher preparation. The lecture maintains that although the facts are certainly of concern, most parents have as their highest priority their personal relationship with their own children and they need to increase their level of engagement in their early adolescent's life. Many middle schools, the lecture asserts, are not engaged in the demanding work necessary to devote equal attention to students' affective and academic needs. Barriers to effective school performance are then discussed. The lecture maintains that parents should feel secure in framing a middle school reform agenda based on their natural parental instincts and asserts that middle schools should: (1) develop a school climate of caring, respect, tolerance, and inclusion; (2) engage each student in appropriate but challenging instruction; and (3) have educators who understand students' needs and who act to meet those needs. The lecture discusses how a simple assessment tool can help parents know if their schools are meeting these minimum expectations, describes some recent reforms in middle schools around the country, and provides information on resources available on middle school reform. The lecture then concludes by asserting that parents need to know that middle school reform is necessary, is possible, is in progress and that the real issue is whether those who complain about middle schools are willing to work together to create more effective schools. (Contains 24 footnotes.) (KB)

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Remarks of Hayes Mizell on October 16, 2002 at a public lecture in Nyack, New York. The lecture was sponsored by Nyack Partners in Education; the Nyack branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Head Start of Rockland; the Rockland 21st Century Collaborative for Children and Youth; Brenda Ross; and the Nyack schools. Mizell is Director of the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

ED 471 909

What Parents Need to Know About Middle School Reform

We are here tonight to talk about middle school reform, but why is this a topic of interest not only in this community but also across the nation? Let me cite just a few reasons:

This past April, a respected education journalist with *The Washington Post* wrote a column in which he said the following:

> "Here is something I have learned from talking to parents the past 20 years. There are no good middle schools. Sure, many of those hormone-flooded enclosures, usually reserved for pre-teens and early teens in grades five (or six) to eight, have fine teachers and devoted principals. But that does little for their reputations in the community. You expect public middle schools to have image problems. But his malady extends to the most expensive private schools in our wealthiest neighborhoods. Ask those parents for an assessment and many will say, 'Well, it's a pretty good place, except for the middle school.' Why is that? The behavioral outrages of early adolescence play a part. So does the modern practice of making middle school classes – with the possible exception of

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mathematics – not so demanding that the young scholars might foment open rebellion against the adult conspiracy that oppresses them."[1]

That is quite an indictment, but a *New York Times* editorial writer topped it last month when he characterized middle schools as "the Bermuda Triangle of public education."[2] Just two weeks ago a journalist for another newspaper wrote that a "middle school malaise exists throughout the country" and went on to point out that the New York State Education Department has "identified almost half of [New York City's] 234 middle schools as requiring major improvements under the federal 'No Child Left Behind' legislation."[3]

Are these just the cheap shots of alarmist education writers or is there some empirical basis for their analysis? One credible source of information is the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. NAEP periodically administers challenging tests to samples of students in states throughout the nation. It then publishes reports on how well students are performing, and these reports receive much attention from the news media.

Two years ago, NAEP published a report of its analysis of trends in student performance using results from all the tests it had administered during the past thirty years. Here are some quotes from that report:

"For both 9 and 13-year-olds, average scores in reading increased during the 1970s, so that by 1980, average scores for both age groups were higher

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[1] Jay Matthews, "Class Struggle: New School Paves Road to Success," WashingtonPost.com, 2 April 2002 at http://www.middleweb.com/MGNEWS1/jaymathews.html

[2] Editorial, "Joel Klein's First Day of School," The New York Times, 5 September 2002, p. A22.

> than in 1971. Since that time, however, no further improvements in average reading scores has been evident…For 13-year-olds, average scores since 1980 have shown no consistent pattern, fluctuating within a three-point range."

Regarding students' science performance, NAEP reported:

> "The average science score for 13-year-olds declined by eight points from 1970 to 1977. The period from 1982 to 1992 was one of relatively steady increases, resulting in a total increase of 11 points between 1977 and 1992. A slight decline since 1992, however, resulted in a 1999 average score that was similar to that in 1970."

If it is some consolation, NAEP reported "a pattern of overall progress" in the average mathematics score for 13-year-olds. By the end of the last century, these students were performing, on average, 10 points higher than they did in 1973.[4]

Let me cite a less hopeful set of data. According to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Education, in the middle grades for the 1999-2000 school year, "between 29 and 40 percent of the middle-grade students enrolled in biology/life science, physical science, or ESL/bilingual education classes had teachers who lacked a major, minor, or certification in the subject taught." If we raise the standard and look at the percentage of middle-grade teachers who both majored in college in the subject they are teaching and who hold a teacher's certificate in that subject, the findings are even more discouraging.

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[3] Gail Robinson, "Middle School Muddle," Gotham Gazette (New York, NY), 30 September 2002. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.gothamgazette.com/iotw/middleschools/.

[4] Jay R. Campbell, Catherine M. Hombo, and John Mazzeo, NAEP 1999 – Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, NCES 2000-469), August 2000, pp. 8-10. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard//pdf/main1999/2000469.pdf.

"Approximately 60 percent of the students in middle-grade English classes (58 percent), foreign language classes (61 percent) and science classes (57 percent) had a teacher who did not report a major and certification in the subject taught."[5]

Finally, a controversial new report concludes that high percentages of eighth grade teachers of English, mathematics, science, and history have unacceptably low expectations of their students' knowledge and skills. For example, the report alleges that:

> "Eighth grade English teachers..show levels of expectations similar to their fourth grade counterparts. While 87% of them expect all or most of their students to write and speak standard English, only 65% expect their students to understand such underpinnings of high school and college English study as characterization in fiction and literary devices such as simile and metaphor."[6]

While such facts surely do not apply to every middle school in the United States, they are cause for concern. But for most parents, it is their personal relationships with their own children that are the highest priority. As their children enter and move through the developmental stage known as "early adolescence" they begin to change. They grow dramatically, some early and some late, but eventually they are no longer the cuddly little children parents found it so easy to love during the elementary school years. Carefree physical affection between parent and child is no longer something parents take

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[5] Marily McMillan Seastrom, Kerry J. Gruber, Robin Henke, Daniel J. McGrath, and Benjamin A. Cohen, Qualifications of the Public School Teacher Workforce: Prevalence of Out-of-Field Teaching, 1987-88 to 1999-2000: Statistical Analysis Report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, NCES 2002-603), May 2002, pp. 9-12. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002603.pdf.

[6] Christopher Barnes, What Do Teachers Teach? A Survey of America's Fourth and Eighth Grade Teachers (New York, NY: Center for Civic Education at the Manhattan Institute), Civic Report No. 28, September 2002. Accessed 10 October 2002 at www.manhattan-institute.org/cr_28.pdf.

for granted, and it is often unwelcome by young adolescents. When their children exhibit intense emotional outbursts that parents hoped had been relegated to early childhood, physical restraint is no longer an option. Children who were once affectionate, trusting, and respectful of adult authority may suddenly become withdrawn, questioning, and critical. Parents are perpetually off-balance as one day their children are joyful and full of life and the next day they act as though life is not worth living. Just when parents believe they have figured out the "rules" of early adolescent development, they realize there are no rules. Parent-child interaction seems to be one negotiation after another, with each party expending enormous energy, trying, or not trying, to figure out how to tolerate sharing the same physical space. The problem is that parents may know intellectually that the changes accompanying young adolescence are normal and necessary for their children to develop, but coming to grips emotionally with these changes is an entirely different matter. Early adolescence, therefore, is not only a time of stress for children but for parents as well.

What adults interpret as the negative behaviors of young adolescents occur with varying degrees of frequency for individual children depending on how intensely each of them experience the diverse and cascading changes of their development. It is not unlike how adults experience middle life. For some adults it is years of great crisis and disruption, for others it is a period of relatively uneventful growth. Most young adolescents do not slip over the edge of emotional turmoil or risk-taking behavior, but this does not mean there are not difficulties. Sooner or later, parents learn the hard lesson that the way to keep these difficulties from spiraling out of control is *not* to turn a blind eye to the more problematic dimensions of their children's development, or to disengage

from their children's lives, but to become more engaged than ever--but gently, ever so gently.

It is against this backdrop that each day parents send their children to a new level of education called "middle school." Parents are generally unfamiliar with schools of this type, but in the best of situations, educators organize and operate these schools to respond to what experts call the "developmental needs" of young adolescents.[7] This simply means that educators know these students are experiencing profound physical, cognitive, psychological, and emotional changes that have an effect on their learning, and how they interact with their peers and adults. The developmental needs of young people between the ages of 11 and 15 years old are well known. There are college courses on the subject, there are monographs and textbooks, there are Internet sites, and of course there are expert consultants. One source describes seven developmental needs of young adolescents:

1. Physical Activity
2. Competence and Achievement
3. Creative Expression
4. Self-Definition
5. Positive Social Interaction with Peers and Adults
6. Clear Structure and Limits
7. Meaningful Participation[8]

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[7] Peter F. Mulhall, Steven B. Mertens, and Nancy Flowers, "How Familiar Are Parents With Middle Level Practices?," Middle School Journal (Columbus, Ohio: National Middle School Association), November 2001, pp. 57-61. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.cprd.uiuc.edu/schools/MSJ%20article%20Nov01.pdf.

[8] North Carolina Area Health Education Centers, Guide for Working With Adolescents: Preceptor/Mentor Handbook, 1996, pp. 12-14 at http://eahec.ecu.edu/telehealth/mentor799manual.pdf.

This list speaks for itself, and when schools take these developmental needs seriously and work every day to provide an education that is responsive to these needs, schools are successful, students are happier, and they achieve at higher levels.

The fact is that we know how to make middle schools function effectively for the students they serve. There is more than 30 years of experience in creating and operating middle schools. During the past 10 years there has been an explosion of innovations, research, and information about how middle schools can become more effective. There are middle schools that serve their students well and earn the approval of parents.

If this is true, you might ask, why are so many people disappointed with the performance of so many middle schools? Do they have unrealistic expectations, or are middle schools in practice falling short of what they should and can be? The answer is that while there are thousands of schools whose names include the words "middle school," too few of them are engaged in the focused, demanding work necessary to serve all their students well.[9] This is not to say, however, that middle school educators are not working hard. If parents have difficulty coping with one or two young adolescents in their own families, just imagine the challenges facing middle school educators responsible for 300 or 500 or 700 or more than 1,000 of these young people in one building. Middle school teachers and administrators do work hard, but that does not mean they always hone their practice to work effectively. Using only muscle to push a rock up a hill is hard work, but effective work is using tools to move the rock up hill more quickly.

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[9] There are approximately 14,000 schools in the United States that include one or more of the "middle grades" of five, six, seven, eight, and nine. About 60% of these include grades six through eight. National Middle School Association, Research Summary #3: Numbers of Middle Schools and Students, accessed 10 October 2002, at http://www.nmsa.org/research/ressum3.htm.

There are several things that seem to happen to some middle schools that keep them from being as good as they should be. They may believe that young adolescence is essentially a learning plateau and that a school's appropriate response is to help students consolidate and refine what they learned in elementary school rather than to expect them to function at higher levels and master more challenging subjects. Other middle schools say they are student centered and responsive to students' developmental needs, but when one looks closely it is hard to tell the difference between these schools and others that seem to have everything on their minds but the students. The schools' may also emphasize controlling student behavior rather than providing rigorous, meaningful, and engaging curriculum and instruction that challenges students and puts their energies to productive use.

Other middle schools boast that they are organized around "the components of an exemplary middle school." According to the National Middle School Association, these components include interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, varied instruction, exploratory programs, and transition programs.[10] Some schools have some of these features, but not all of them, while other schools have all of them but they are of poor quality. Some schools implement these features without thoroughly understanding their purpose and it is rare that schools ever evaluate whether and how the implementation of the components benefits students.[11] It is as though a person tells you certain exercises

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[10]National Middle School Association, Research Summary #4: Exemplary Middle Schools, accessed 10 October 2002, at http://www.nmsa.org/research/ressum4.htm.

[11] Some middle school experts assert "that no single perfect middle school model exists…Teaming may not be appropriate in all schools. If it isn't, what other structures can be implemented to provide a supportive environment for students? Advisory programs frequently don't work. If not, what other arrangements can be developed to provide positive adult-student relationships?" Ronald D. Williamson and J. Howard Johnston, "The Fate of Middle Schooling," The School Administrator Web Edition, August 1998, at http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/1998_08/Williamson.htm.

will help you get in shape, but in practice your exercise technique is flawed, you continue your high-fat diet, and then you wonder why you do not lose weight.

Still another reason why some middle schools have not reached their potential is that they focus disproportionately on only one or two dimensions of young adolescents' diverse needs. For example, some middle schools perceive their students to be fragile and vulnerable, with overwhelming psycho-emotional needs. These schools may believe their priority should be to provide students support and nurture their self-esteem. While it is true that middle school students benefit from interacting with adults who genuinely care about them, and while parents certainly want their children to be in the charge of educators who support them, the primary reason parents send their children to school is for their intellectual development. Most parents want middle schools to prepare their children academically for high school and the educational opportunities that follow. Middle schools do students no favors if they pay so much attention to students' needs for "self-definition " and "positive social interaction with peers and adults" that they devote too little attention to developing students' academic knowledge and skills. The opposite is also possible, particularly in this day of state standards, high-stakes testing, and punitive accountability systems. Schools are under so much pressure that it is not surprising that some of them are pushing the pendulum all the way over to academics, crowding out opportunities for students to explore and develop their competencies in such areas as performing or visual arts.

The challenge of the middle grades, then, is to devote equal attention both to students' affective needs and to their academic needs, weaving the two together, using the one to support the other. Some middle schools successfully meet this challenge,

many do not. This is why middle school reform is necessary. It is not enough to simply have schools that purport to give special attention to the middle grades. The ultimate criterion for success is the results these schools achieve. If all students satisfactorily progress each year towards performing at higher levels, if all students leave middle school performing on grade level, adequately prepared to begin ninth grade work, and if all students are much more confident about their talents and abilities than when they began middle school, then we can characterize a middle school as successful.

Achieving these results is not easy, but schools are more likely to achieve them if they partner with parents. But what are parents' appropriate roles in middle school reform? After all, parents are not school system employees. They are not education experts. Most parents only go to their children's schools for a conference with a teacher, to see their children participate in school-sponsored activities, or if the schools experience problems with their children. Many parents are so stressed by the demands of modern living that it is all they can do to make sure their children have completed their homework. How, then, should parents think about middle school reform? What is reasonable for them to expect of their schools?

First, parents should feel secure in framing a middle school reform agenda based on their natural parental instincts. For example, parents want their children to be safe. The first responsibility of every middle school is to create and maintain an environment in which each student is physically and emotionally safe. Because there are laws requiring the safety of school buildings and prohibiting weapons, these are priority issues for most schools. However, there are no laws prohibiting taunting, bullying, disrespect, and verbal put-downs. Many people consider these a normal part of middle school life,

but they should not be and parents have every right to demand that schools make reforms that will minimize or eliminate these behaviors. It is not a matter of school rules, it is a painstaking process of developing a school climate of caring, respect, tolerance, and inclusion. If a school is not working hard every day to make each student, teacher, and administrator personally responsible for ensuring a safe and productive environment that benefits everyone, then the school is badly in need of reform.

Parents also want their children to succeed academically. An important function of middle schools is to help students learn that with effort they can perform at levels higher than they think possible. This occurs when schools engage each student in appropriate but challenging instruction, providing the time and support necessary for all students to demonstrate that they can meet academic standards. It does not occur when schools assign students to classes, or teachers to classes, based on the assumption that some students are more deserving than others. It does not occur when schools fail to insist that each year all their teachers will become more knowledgeable about the subjects they teach and more effective in using that knowledge to raise levels of student achievement. If adults in the building are not constantly seeking to improve their performance for the specific purpose of enabling more students to succeed academically, these middle schools need to reform.

Parents also want to know that the adults responsible for their children understand students' needs and act to meet those needs. This requires educators who are knowledgeable about young adolescents, their development, and how they learn effectively. While there are middle school teachers and administrators whose education or experience has prepared them in this regard, others fall woefully short. Moreover,

parents cannot even assume that all school board members, superintendents, and key central office staff know enough about the education of young adolescents to make sound policy and operational decisions that affect middle school students. Many do not. Perhaps this is why so many school systems have no practical education philosophy to guide the education of young adolescents, with the result that the system's middle schools are unclear about their mission or how to fulfill it. Perhaps this is why so many school systems neglect middle schools or feel free to shift middle level grades to and from elementary and high schools to accommodate declines or growth in student enrollment. Where this exists, it calls for middle school reform.

These should be minimum parental expectations of the middle schools their children attend. But how will parents know if their schools are meeting these expectations? Perhaps the best way is to use a simple assessment tool developed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, a network of approximately 60 middle school leaders from throughout the United States. This assessment is "parent friendly," written in language that is easy to understand. It clearly describes criteria for a high-performing middle school and the behaviors and activities parents should expect to see in such a school. The Forum's Internet site also describes a process for organizing a small group of people to use the self-assessment.[12] Using this assessment tool, parents

[12] The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, "Schools to Watch – Our Criteria: [The School Assessment Chart]," accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.schoolstowatch.org/criteria/AssessmentChart.pdf.
Also see "Schools to Watch – Our Criteria: School Assessment Activity" at http://www.schoolstowatch.org/criteria/assessment.htm and "About the Forum: Our Vision Statement" at http://www.mgforum.org/vision.asp.

can work together, or partner with educators, to determine the extent to which their middle schools are organized and operating to serve all students well.[13]

If parents conclude that middle school reform is necessary, some will want to know if there is a project or a program to "fix" their school. The answer is no, and yes. The community and district context for each school is different, and while individual schools are in some ways remarkably similar, in other ways they are distinct. Each school has some strengths that it should sustain and upon which it should build, but it also has weaknesses that need attention. Neither the strengths nor the deficiencies are likely to be the same for each school. Therefore, it is not useful to prescribe a particular reform intervention for all middle schools. Schools that are in the process of reforming themselves are doing so for many different reasons and in many different ways. For example, here are some excerpts from recent news articles across the country:

- In Corpus Christi, Texas, three middle schools took the initiative to concentrate on literacy and "developed curricula that centered on getting almost every child to read at or above grade level…The percentage of sixth-graders meeting minimum standards went from 79 last year to 91…seventh- and eighth-grade reading scores also improved."[14]
- In a Portland, Oregon, middle school each student stays "with the same teacher for three years. Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students share reading, language arts and social studies lessons." After several years of

[13] Middle schools may want to consider using the more sophisticated "School Improvement Self-Study" developed by the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois. This self-study has been used in hundreds of middle schools. Go to http://www.cprd.uiuc.edu/self-study/Self-Study.htm.

[14] Tim Eaton, "CCISD's Renewed Reading Push Focuses on Literacy," Corpus Christi Caller-Times, 28 May 2002. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.middleweb.com/MGNEWS1/MGN0614.html#anchor833511.

using this approach, the percentage of eighth-grade students meeting or exceeding the state's reading standards increased by 20 points.[15]

- In Lincoln, Nebraska, three middle schools volunteered to participate in a district-sponsored project to improve the quality of teacher-made tests. Teachers participated in eight hours of professional development to learn how to design better assessments. One middle school teacher reports: "'Now, before I write a quiz or a test, I think about what are the most important topics I should include. I make sure that I have some problem-solving questions. I make sure that there are some different levels of thinking going on'..[Previously, the teacher] used tests strictly for grading. These days, he spends more time reviewing students' answers, looking for patterns, and thinking about what he needs to reteach differently."[16]

- In New Bedford, Massachusetts, a middle school eliminated tracking, in addition to mounting other reforms. It does not offer either honors or lower ability classes, though several times a week it does provide "two 45-minute periods of algebra per week for students who must pass a test to qualify...[and] about a third of the school's students also take a math refresher course, called Math Plus, for two periods a week."[17]

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform also maintains an Internet site where there are extensive case histories of what it calls "Schools to Watch."

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[15] Clifton R. Chestnut, "Reinventing The Classroom," The Oregonian, 10 June 2002. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.middleweb.com/MGNEWS1/MGN0614.html#anchor1316585.
[16] Lynn Olson, "Up Close and Personal," Education Week, 22 May 2002. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.edweek.com/ew/newstory.cfm?slug=37assess.h21.
[17] Aaron Nicodemus, "New Approach Catching On," Standard-Times, accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.s-t.com/daily/04-02/04-07-02/a01lo004.htm.

These are four schools in Texas, Kentucky, and Illinois the Forum has identified as being well on their way towards meeting the Forum's criteria for high-performing middle schools.[18] Other stories of how middle schools are reforming are included in a new publication, Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-Achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School.[19]

The important lessons from these examples are that each school took the initiative to break out of old unproductive practices, and search for and try new approaches to solve problems. Though it is likely that more than a few teachers and even parents had major reservations about these innovations, the schools understood that they had to take considered risks to serve students more effectively. There is no one way to middle school reform; there is no best way. What matters most is an accurate diagnosis of a school's problems, the selection or adaptation of experienced- or research-based approaches to solving these problems, competence and persistent good faith in implementing the reforms, and carefully assessing the results over time.

It is very important for parents and educators not to approach middle school reform with the belief that a school's problems are unique or that other people have not made efforts to address similar problems. There is a lot of experience and information that communities, schools, and parents can tap to reform their middle schools. Here are just a few of the resources currently available for people who want to learn more about middle school reform:

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[18] National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, "Schools To Watch – Visit Our Schools." Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.schoolstowatch.org/visit.htm.

- There are now at least a half dozen "comprehensive school reform models" that educators and researchers have developed specifically for the middle grades. These models seek to bring about changes in all facets of a school, including organization and climate; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; professional development; leadership; and parent/community involvement. The models include:
  - ✓ AIM at Middle School Results (http://www.takingaim.org/)
  - ✓ Different Ways of Knowing (http://www.dwoknet.galef.org/)
  - ✓ Making Middle Grades Work (http://www.sreb.org/programs/MiddleGrades/MiddleGradesindex.asp)
  - ✓ Middle Start (http://www.middlestart.org/about.htm)
  - ✓ Talent Development Middle School Model (http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdms/)
  - ✓ Turning Points (http://www.turningpts.org/)
  - ✓ In pilot phase: Success for All Middle School Project (http://www.successforall.net/curriculum/sfamiddleschool.htm)[20]
- A persistent problem in middle schools is that many teachers do not have a deep knowledge of the subjects they teach.[21] Without this content

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[19] Southern Regional Education Board, Opening Doors to the Future: Preparing Low-Achieving Middle Grades Students to Succeed in High School (Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board, 2002). Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/outstanding/2002_Outstanding_Pract..pdf.

[20] See also, Scott Joftus, Every Child a Graduate: A Framework for an Excellent Education for all Middle and High School Students (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education), September 2002. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.all4ed.org/policymakers/Every/index.html.

[21] In an article regarding middle school teachers who switch the subjects they teach, a researcher concluded: "The practice of allowing elementary-certified teachers to teach any subject at any time in middle school underlies the high levels of internal turnover. These teachers are trained as generalists so they can be assigned different subjects each year. Yet they are expected to be able to teach these subjects in greater depth than in elementary school. As a result, they may find themselves assigned to subjects they

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knowledge, and the instructional skills to go with it, teachers cannot be effective in raising levels of student performance. The only practical means that school systems and schools have to address this problem is professional development, sometimes referred to as "in-service." This means that teachers get on-the-job training to increase what they know and can do. However, in many school systems this professional development is poorly conceived and executed, and it has little or no positive effect on instruction. One study concluded that "Although educators and researchers agree that middle grades teachers should be experts in the best practices for young adolescents, there are significant challenges in making this a reality."[22] The National Staff Development Council has identified a total of 26 middle school programs in mathematics, science, reading, and social studies that include effective professional development and increase student achievement. If middle schools are serious about increasing the performance levels of both teachers and students in particular subjects, they would do well to consult the National Staff Development Council report that describes the 26

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either do not wish to teach or do not feel capable of teaching." Allen M. Ruby, "Internal Teacher Turnover in Urban Middle School Reform," Journal of Education of Students Placed at Risk (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.), Volume 7, Number 4, 2002, pp. 402-403.

[22] Nancy Flowers, Steven B. Mertens, and Peter F. Mulhall, "Four Important Lessons About Teacher Professional Development," Middle School Journal, May 2002, p. 60. Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.cprd.uiuc.edu/ (click on "Reports and Publications"; on the Reports and Publications page click on "School Reform and Innovation"; on the School Reform and Innovation page click on "Four Important Lessons...").

programs and the results they have achieved. The report is freely available on the Internet.[23]

- In middle schools, the content of courses is just as important as the instruction. But the content may not be designed to engage and motivate students, or it may not help students learn what they need to know to perform at standard. To address this problem, the Education Development Center has published a series of guides to help schools evaluate their course content and select or develop curricula appropriate for young adolescents. These guides for language arts, mathematics, and science are also available on the Internet.[24]
- Finally, the most valuable single source of information about middle school reform is an Internet site named "MiddleWeb" at www.middleweb.com. This is the world's most comprehensive and substantive Internet site focusing exclusively on middle schools; more than 3,000 people visit MiddleWeb each day. It has too many features to describe here, but MiddleWeb includes:
    - A weekly list of newspaper articles from across the United States that report on local developments in middle school education. These

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[23] Joellen Killion, What Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development (Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council, 1999). Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.nsdc.org/midbook/.

[24] Lynn T. Goldsmith and Ilene Kantrov, "Evaluating Middle Grades Curricula," at http://www.middleweb.com/EDCarticle.html. Margaret Russell Ciardi, Kantrov, and Goldsmith, Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle Grades Language Arts (Newton, MA: Education Development Center, 2000). Barbara Bruner Berns, Kantrov, Marian Pasquale, Doris Santamaria Makang, Bernie Zubrowski, and Goldsmith, Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle Grades Science. Goldsmith and Kantrov, Guiding Curriculum Decisions for Middle Grades Mathematics.
Accessed 10 October 2002 at http://www.middleweb.com/EDC/EDCmain.html.

articles provide a convenient way to learn about the challenges local middle schools face and how they are responding to them.

- Weekly diary entries by several middle school teachers and a principal, each working in a different school in different states. These candid and highly revealing diary entries vividly capture how conscientious middle school educators are struggling, reflecting and innovating to serve their students more effectively.
- A weekly "Of Particular Interest" column that reports on and provides links to the most current articles, research reports, and studies about improving middle schools.
- A daily "listserve" that posts the e-mails of participating middle school teachers. This provides a forum in which the teachers share their experiences, techniques, and frustrations, seek advice, and learn from their peers how to improve their practice.

These are just a few sources of information readily available to parents and educators. People who want to reform their middle schools do not have to wring their hands. There are answers to the questions "What can we do?" or "What's Working?" There are abundant sources of advice and direction. However, this does not mean that reform is easy. In fact, it is hard because it means letting go of ineffective practices, learning new behaviors, implementing and ensuring the quality of new practices, and carefully assessing the results. This is where the element of "will" is so important. Even if people know what to do, they may not choose to take actions they know are necessary for all middle school students to be academically successful.

What do parents need to know about middle school reform? They need to know it is necessary. They need to know it is possible. They need to know that in advocating and working for middle school reform it is okay for them to trust their better instincts about what is good for their children. They need to know that each day in middle schools across this country there are teachers and administrators working to reform their schools. They need to know that for schools and communities that are serious about reform, there is a wealth of experience, expertise, and information upon which they can draw.

The real issue is whether people who complain about middle schools are willing to work together to create more effective schools. The tough regimen of reform is one that many people, both parents and educators, prefer to avoid because it can be inconvenient, long, and sometimes painful. It will be much less so if parents and educators work together, believing that reform is necessary and possible, sharing perspectives and information, forging bonds of respect and trust, and collaborating to create middle schools that serve all students well.

Thank you.

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